

**Alannah Hopkin
(& Aidan Higgins)**

Dermot Healy: Newcomer, Mentor, Old Hand

I

Dermot Healy and Aidan Higgins: Old Hand and Newcomer

Aidan Higgins, who will be 88 in March, 2015, has not been well enough to write a piece about Dermot Healy, though he sends his best wishes to this project. I have been Aidan's partner for the past 28 years, and a friend of Dermot's for about the same length of time.

I first read Dermot Healy in 1986 when Aidan gave me a copy of *Fighting with Shadows*, and told me Dermot was the best writer currently working in Ireland. This was confirmed by a quote from Aidan on its cover: "A terrific novel, bouncing off the ropes, the best novel to come out of Ireland since *Malone Dies*."

Aidan had discovered Dermot's work some ten years earlier, when he was judging the Hennessy Literary Awards for David Marcus. "Give all the prize money to Dermot Healy," Aidan told Marcus. "No one else comes near him."

When I first met Dermot he and Aidan were still very much mentor and protégé or rather, old hand and newcomer, neither of them having a hierarchical way of thinking. I immediately felt completely at home with Dermot. It was like having another version of Aidan to hand, closer to my own age, only two years older as opposed to 23.

Aidan was helped at the beginning of his career by Samuel Beckett, mentored, we would say nowadays, and he did what he could to encourage Dermot. "Write for nothing and yourself," Beckett advised Higgins in the first letter he wrote to him from Paris: "In you already, with the beginner, there is the old hand" – words that were equally apt for Dermot.

Beckett recommended Aidan's work to his publisher, John Calder, who was a key supporter in the early years. In turn, Aidan recommended Dermot's work to the editor Bill Swainson, who had started his career in John Calder's office, and had moved on to Allison and Busby, the publisher of Dermot's first two books.

But just as important as practical help, were the hours that Dermot and Aidan spent walking around London, no doubt visiting the occasional pub, talking, exchanging ideas, sparking off each other. Like Aidan, Dermot was largely self-educated. Both were voracious readers, and most of the time both found American literature and literature in translation more interesting than the works of their English and Irish contemporaries. Aidan immediately recognised a kindred spirit in Dermot. He was impressed by the power of Dermot's imagination, his sure use of metaphor, and the way

that he was pushing the boundaries of writing all the time. He found Dermot's work far more exciting and innovative than that of his own contemporaries – Francis Stuart, say, or John McGahern. This is from Aidan's 1986 review of *Fighting With Shadows*:

The energy of Irish writing is dependent largely upon the vernacular and idiomatic; street language in Ulysses; the frequently forked-tongued natives found they had another hidden lingo at their disposal... And now Dermot Healy, who takes his rightful place in the first rank, a beady eye fixed on what's what in the here-and-now.¹

Aidan's early stories were strange and unconventional, but the novel that followed – *Langrishe, Go Down* – has a relatively conventional narrative trajectory, locating it firmly in the tradition of the 'Big House novel'. It is very different in both style and content to his later works of fiction, especially *Balcony of Europe*, *Scenes from a Receding Past* and *Bornholm Night Ferry*. Aidan is chiefly known for *Langrishe, Go Down*, but it is his least typical novel, and the one he likes least.

Aidan describes what happened when Samuel Beckett joined a gathering of friends in London one evening in 1966, shortly after the publication of *Langrishe*:

My wife, Jill, somewhat importunate, pressed him for his candid opinion of *Langrishe*. He said he had only read half of it so far and didn't wish to give an opinion. When she still pressed him, wine speaking, Beckett in exasperation (feathers rising) finally burst out: 'If you want to have my opinion I think it's literary shit and he knows it!'²

Aidan's next novel, *Balcony of Europe*, published eight years later, is a resounding rejection of the conventions of 'literary shit'. Dan Ruttle's obsessional affair with his friend's wife, set in Nerja in Andalusia, is a lightly fictionalised version of what was actually happening as the first draft was being written. The reader experiences Ruttle's daily life with unusual immediacy, unmediated by fine writing (literary shit). Instead you have a collage-like assembly of visual images, historical fact, dreams, anecdotes, lists, polyglot references, dialogue, embedded quotations from other writers and philosophers (both famous and obscure, their origins often unacknowledged), and detailed descriptions of physical surroundings so accurate that you smell the noisome Spanish latrine as vividly as you see the dance of sunlight on the Mediterranean.

In *Bornholm Night-Ferry*, love letters written between the author (again lightly fictionalised) and a Danish poet, are used apparently verbatim, so that rather than reading *about* the affair, the reader is plunged right *into* the affair, experiencing its progress first hand. It is another novel totally devoid of literary shit.

¹ Aidan Higgins, "Cantraps of Fermented Words," *Windy Arbours: Collected Criticism*, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006: 192.

² Aidan Higgins, "On the Rack," unpublished paper read at Cúirt, Galway, 24 April, 1999.

Dermot learnt from reading Aidan's novels, but he followed his own project, taking the ball and running even further and faster with it, through *A Goat's Song*, to his novel-like memoir, *The Bend for Home* and *Sudden Times*, until he produced the painfully beautiful account of the daily life of Psyche and his neighbours, largely told in the vernacular, that is *Long Time, No See*.

Dermot and Aidan shared an instinctive conviction that writing should give an approximation of the experience being described, that reading about something should be as vivid and memorable as living it. By outlawing *telling*, and the rhetorical tropes that accompany the telling, you banish the authorial voice, and the writerly ego.

Both Aidan Higgins and Dermot Healy know what Samuel Beckett meant when he said that when you listen to the voice in your head it is not literature that you hear.

II

Healy as Mentor: "Go daft sometimes"

'The great Irish writer Dermot Healy was laid to rest yesterday in the company of poets and artists, musicians and singers and, above all, his neighbours.' (*Irish Times*, July 4, 2014)

It would have been nice if they had called him a "great Irish writer" in print while he was still alive. He would have liked that, most likely he would have laughed, but he would have liked it. His greatness lay not only in the extraordinary body of work that he produced, but in his generosity and kindness to other writers, which I have experienced first-hand.

I published two novels with Hamish Hamilton (London) in my early thirties, and then got stuck in a loop with an impossible historical novel. After about ten years of rejections, I decided to write another contemporary novel, and I called it *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*.

No, not the film by Ken Loach about the fight against the Black and Tans in 1920: this was a contemporary novel named after a traditional air because the chorus was relevant to the story: '*Come home, come home, come home it sings/The wind that shakes the barley*'. Shortly after the typescript was sent out to prospective publishers, the news of the film broke. Apart from the horrible coincidence of the title, the film was being made on my doorstep: the whole of south County Cork was dotted with discreet little signposts for the film crew: WSB.

In a fit of pique I renamed the novel *Under the Weather*, a nod to Malcolm Lowry and to the wet Irish summer, and still nobody wanted to publish it. I started to think maybe there was something wrong with it. Dermot kindly volunteered to take a look at it. I posted him a bound typescript, and he sent it back to me with comments all over it in his strangely child-like handwriting, and a three-page, single-spaced typed letter, dated 8 April, 2005. Before the letter,

there was a long phone call, to let me know as soon as he knew, that he liked it, a typically kind gesture. I remember he kept saying, "It has the ring of truth." That simple test has since become my most important criterion for judging a novel or a story: does it have the ring of truth?

Aidan once looked at some stories for me. His advice was to get rid of the all-knowing narrative voice, the voice telling the story, and let the story emerge through the speech and actions of the characters. Dermot's close textual advice echoed this, and could be summed up as an extreme version of the old adage, 'Show, don't tell'. Time and again he advises redrafting a scene in dialogue, increasing the use of direct speech, and cutting all explanations:

"Keep a close eye on the dialogue. Go daft sometimes."

"Give her plenty of dialogue, early on. In her dialogue we will learn who she is. Let the narrator stay quiet."

"Let her voice speak out more often in inverted commas, and let the voices of the others speak out in inverted commas, and not have them trapped by the narrator in letters or journals."

"Go daft sometimes" was a brilliant way of getting rid of the censoring superego, and in my case, the journalist, who is compelled to explain everything. I have used Dermot's advice ever since when writing stories, especially the bit about going daft, and I believe it has made them much better.